

and benefits for which veterans can apply.

Veteranvoice.info, formed in 2005 and run by four volunteer directors, has also set up a well-used online system that provides former military personnel details and tips about accessing benefits.

Veterans of Canada has also established an executive committee. It runs an online forum for veterans only, has connections with businesses that offer discounts for former soldiers, and provides analysis of government policies. Its founder, Don Leonardo, has also registered as a lobbyist for veterans' issues.

But Tom Eagles, dominion president of the Royal Canadian Legion, describes such organizations as "splinter groups," adding he doesn't pay much attention to them. "I'm not too sure about their membership," he said. "Yes, they have a webpage, (but) does a webpage make you a veterans organization?" Eagles pointed out that the Legion has 300,000 members. Of those, 100,000 are veterans. Most are Second World War or Korean War veterans. The rest are sons and daughters of veterans or members of the public. (The Legion doesn't know how many are Afghan or Gulf war veterans. But one-third of its members are 75 or older. Another 50 per cent are aged between 54 and 69.)

Blais counters that O'Toole's insistence that modern veterans groups be like the Legion, with offices and meetings, shows a lack of understanding about today's veterans. The new generation of former soldiers communicates via Facebook and other social media outlets. They don't pay membership dues. They are generally not "joiners," Blais said.

"Look, we aren't like the Legion and never will be," said Blais, a former soldier who suffered a non-combat injury. "We are an advocacy group working to make things better for injured veterans. We aren't a social club where we sit around drinking beer in the Legion hall."

Don Leonardo of Veterans of Canada says the government is making a mistake by holding up

the Legion as an example for other groups to emulate. The Legion has sat on the sidelines for years as veterans benefits have been cut and Veterans Affairs offices closed, he argues.

But Leonardo, whose group was also shut out of the veteran's stakeholder panel in November, says he is willing to give the new minister the benefit of the doubt, noting O'Toole has a very short window to come up with improvements for veterans' benefits. (O'Toole himself served in the military.)

Gulf War veteran Bruyea is less diplomatic. He says the Legion's dominion command has become a government mouthpiece. He finds it ironic the Legion is now trying to convince the government to make changes to the controversial New Veterans Charter, since the organization initially backed it. The charter has prompted anger among modern-day veterans because it provides fewer benefits than those offered to military personnel from previous wars.

"The Legion was the government's No. 1 supporter of the charter even as it was being warned that it would provide new veterans with less benefits," said Bruyea, whose activities as a veterans advocate have angered Veterans Affairs and prompted department officials to closely monitor his activities. (In one instance, the federal privacy commissioner found that Veterans Affairs officials broke the law by their mishandling of his medical and psychological files. The Conservative government apologized to Bruyea in 2010 for the way he was treated.)

In addition, the Legion refused to support the creation of a veterans' ombudsman, claiming it would just add more bureaucracy, Bruyea says. But the office has since been heralded as an important voice for righting wrongs against veterans.

Some modern-day veterans have complained they are not welcome at the Legion because they didn't fight in so-called traditional wars.

Eagles said his organization doesn't take orders from government and has been steadfast in its